The Snake Doesn't Have
to Have All the Lines

Genesis 3:1-14
Revelation 3:14-22
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Adam and Eve sold out. Then they were: placed in an abundant paradise, created in God's own image, free to be who they were, free to have dominion over the world, free to be responsible for themselves, each other and the world. But they sold out. Eve allowed a snake to tell her what to do. Adam allowed Eve to tell him what to do. Both sacrificed their own integrity: their own God-given ability to determine who and what they would be. The Snake had the final word, and from that point on the story of humanity is a series of tragedies, misfortunes, wars, unhappiness, alienation and estrangement.

That's how the Bible begins the drama of man and God in relationship - with man selling out. That's the meaning of the text after we get beyond the adolescent dispute about whether or not it is historically true. It is a major biblical theme, told over and over again: Cain and Abel: the tower of Babel: Noah: Jonah: the covenant people of Israel asking Moses to take them back into the security of Egyptian slavery. It emerges, finally, in the last document in the Bible: the Book of Revelation. There the writer addresses himself to the early Christian Church in Laodicea. It was a dangerous time: the fire of Roman persecution was burning brightly: and he said: "I know all your ways: You are neither hot nor cold. How I wish you were either cold or hot! But because you are lukewarm, neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth."

Now that imagery is a bit earthy, but it is clearly a continuation of that same theme introduced by the snake in the creation story. Men were still refusing to stand on their own feet; to be men, fully responsible for themselves and all of creation.

Several years ago Jean Kerr wrote a delightful little book under the title "The Snake Has All the Lines." That title derived, I believe, from a play in which one of her children was participating. The book has nothing to do with

this sermon.- except the title: "The Snake Has All the Lines." That seems to be what the Bible says about the human condition. Men, notoriously, refuse to be men - in the garden of Eden: in the early Christian Church: and, I would suggest to you, - in the United States of America in the year of our Lord 1970.

It is necessary, at this point, to put a name on the human condition we are discussing - this word - ancient and venerable - is "sloth". Another word for it is "apathy". I recall discussing our worship service with some students several years ago at which time they were being very critical of some of the colloquial language contained in our prayers of confession. They singled out the phrase - "We acknowledge and confess before Thee our sinful nature, prone to evil and slothful in good." "Slothful" just didn't ring any bells for them and I was inclined to agree. But since then I have come to see that sloth is perhaps at the very heart of our predicament, and that if there is anything which needs confessing by a congregation of average Christians in our day it is precisely this slothfulness in doing good.

The early Church fathers included sloth in their list of seven deadly, or capital, sins - along with pride, covetousness, lust, anger, gluttony and envy. And while we might want to take issue with that list in terms of theology and psychology, we do, I think, have to acknowledge its wisdom in identifying sloth as a major source of man's tragic and sorry story.

Sloth comes from a Greek word which means "not caring". And while we have been taught that the real problem with man is his pride, his wanting to be "more than" God created him to be; sloth suggests that there is another side to that particular coin: that man is equally inclined to be "less than" God created him to be. One theologian defines it this way: "Sloth means the determined or lackadaisical refusal to live up to one's essential humanity. It is the torpid unwillingness to revel in the delights or to share in the responsibilities of being fully human." [Harvery Cox - Apathy, Abdication and Acedia, in "Who's Killing the Church?"]

Sloth means not really living. It means allowing others to determine who and what we will be. It means reneging our basic responsibility to be where the action is and retreating, instead, to the lukewarm security of non-involvement in anything more significant than television and crabgrass.

Sloth is a dangerous sin because it is essentially social and political. It leads a man to feel that he doesn't really matter: that his own garden is the only one that needs tending: that his life begins and ends in the pursuit of his own pleasures and securities.

In Hannah Arendt's biographical work on Adolph Eichmann, subtitled "A Study in the Banality of Evil", the dangers of this kind of sloth are clearly revealed. Eichmann, as a prototype man, was capable of committing monstrous crimes simply by doing his job and not asking questions. A whole nation did the same. Good, Christian, respectable people just did their jobs and refused to ask questions or get involved or take risks; i.e. they were guilty of sloth, guilty of being less than men. And on all of them rests the blame for Auschuitz, Buchenwald and the horrors of Nazism. On all of them - and on all of us, because we're all involved - in allowing the snake all the lines.

Now, that's the Biblical and Theological rationale for sloth. But what does it have to do with us? A great deal, really: and while decorum would seem to dictate a sermon on motherhood, or at least the family, on this particular day, I feel deeply that the events of recent weeks necessitate our by-passing that seasonal luxury. I think we live in the midst of the most crucial - and therefore the most dangerous events in recent history. I think we are turning a corner in this nation - with the future up for grabs.

We are a severelypolarized people. There exist in this nation extremes on both the left and right which have steadily grown in strength to a point that now boils over in violence almost every day. History teaches us that when this situation persists; when polarization continues and grows something has to give. One of two things has to happen - either we will have revolution

and civil war, or we will have a police state in which the basic freedoms contained in the Bill of Rights become the first casualty.

I think sometimes that we simply don't comprehend the extent of polarization and alienation across the country because it isn't here. Or at least it isn't as visible in this community. I think we feel smug about the fact that only one half of one percent of the student body at Purdue demonstrates, forgetting that last Friday 10% of the institution of higher education in the nation were closed. I think we feel very good about the fact that the 700 black people in Lafayette have kept in the places this community has assigned them, and forget the fact that out there there are hundreds of thousands - and millions - who are being told to arm for the day of liberation. I think we fail to accurately guage the seriousness of the situation when one group rallies under the banner of "Killing a Commie for Christ" or "shoot all the dissenters" - while on the other end of the spectrum the police are called "pigs" and people are urged to forcibly overthrow the government.

Well, it's going on out there and I speak to you this morning out of a deep conviction that the time of silent, non-involvement in the issues is over. I speak to you out of my deep conviction that we are polarized dangerously precisely because the middle, the people between the poles, you and I, have been silent too long. History teaches us that too. The balance of power always resides in the middle. And when the middle is silent, or muzzled or too firghtened to act - or just slothful - the future will be determined by one of the two extremes.

This nation needs nothing so much as majority that has found its voice; a moderate center that refuses to panic, that has the courage to speak and act. This community needs nothing so much as people who see what is happening - who aren't afraid to call "Public Opinion" to counteract that daily combination of ignorance and extremism. This community needs nothing so much as people who will stand up when shooting all the dissenters is proposed as a way to cope with the dilemma on campus, or where someone suggests that the National Guard has

the right to fire into a group of students. We need that - not next year, not tomorrow - but today. But we're not getting it - and the reason we're not getting it is sloth, that old refusal to be responsible, to stand up and be what God created us to be.

If this nation falls either to the right or left it will be because the people in the middle allowed it to happen by their own inactivity. And, you know, the same thing is true for the Church. Much of the in-put for this sermon came from an essay by Harvey Cox, written for a book with a very interesting title - "Who's Killing the Church?" The day of the Church's sacred and hallowed position in our culture is over. It is no longer necessary socially or politically to be on the rolls of a main-line Protestant congregation. It is quite acceptable today to cut one's grass on Sunday morning. That's good in that it frees the Church to be itself. But what it does say is that the Church, now without the security of popular support, had better know what it is about and be prepared to be in mission in the name of Jesus Christ. Just being there isn't enough any more.

But we're not making it: not because the people out there are oppossed to us: not because we are being persecuted and repressed -- but because the people still in the Church don't care. That is clear. That is where we are. What is killing the Church? Not Communism, not Fascism - not Atheism - but apathy, sloth. Who's killing the Church? Not the radicals, the extremists who bark at our heels from both sides - but Church members who don't care enough to be here, to give, to get involved: lukewarm Christians, neither hot nor cold who allow the snake all the lines.

Well it doesn't have to be that way. And let us pray God that it won't be that way much longer - because we don't have that kind of time in either the Church or the nation.

I've laid all this before you this morning not because my deepest convictions are political - which they are not - but because I am interested in people

hearing the Gospel. That Gospel draws a pretty negative picture of man in the Adam and Eve story. And the first requirement of hearing it is to acknowledge that the picture is accurate. It describes you and me. We know a little about allowing the snake all the lines. We know what it means to crawl meekly into our shells when the going gets tough.

But that's not the whole Gospel. There is another possibility, another man. The Bible, in fact, calls him the second Adam. Jesus Christ is his name, and he is man as God intended all men to be. In him we see what it means to live, to drink deeply at the cup of life, to love, to give, to be a man. In him we see what it means to be responsible for ourselves and for others. In him we see that the only real security in the world is in the love of God: and from him we learn what it means to be free - free enough to be fully human.

That's the Gospel. A call to stand up and be. A call to revel in the fundamental goodness of God's creation. A call to give oneself in a life for others. A call to be involved deeply in every precious minute of time given us to live.

Let's not allow the snake all the lines. Let's hear the Good News of the Gospel. Let's believe it, and live it - and be the men and women God created us to be.

Amen.

Almighty God, we are a troubled and divided people. We lay before you the great concerns of our nation and pray your blessing on all those who lead us. Grant us courage, our Father, to be involved; to speak and act out of our love for you and all men. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

I am indebted for the content of this sermon to Dr. Harvey Cox, whose essay "Apathy, Abdication and Acedia" in Who's Killing the Church deals with the theological and social meanings of "sloth", and the young Americans in Vietnam and on campus whose deaths somehow fail to touch the conscience of all of us in the "silent middle".